

# *Stretch at 10: A Progress Report on Arizona State University's Stretch Program*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Arizona State University's basic writing Stretch Program has now been in existence for more than ten years. Statistical data for nearly 8,000 Stretch Program students continues to indicate that the program helps a range of at-risk students succeed. This is true, also, for students from under-represented groups, who comprise roughly 40% of Stretch Program students. Stretch has been replicated at other colleges and universities, but as with any basic writing program, there are still problems and political issues that crop up and that must be dealt with.*

**KEYWORDS:** Stretch Program, *basic writing, under-represented groups, pass rate, continuation rate, retention*

In the fall of 1992, Arizona State University (ASU) had just completed several years during which its “basic writers” had been outsourced to a local community college.<sup>1</sup> There had been the usual conversations about whether or not “basic writers” belonged at the university, and that perhaps the local community college would serve them better. But what Director of Composition David Schwalm had originally feared had come to pass: once these students were told to take a community college “remedial” writing class (ENG 071), only a few of them ever returned to ASU to take other classes, and those who did were unprepared for the university-level work expected of them. The remedial classes (in which ASU controlled neither the curriculum nor the teachers nor the class size) simply did not serve these particular students well. In addition, students paid university tuition but received no college

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credit for these outsourced classes. Schwalm was determined to somehow bring these basic writing students back to ASU and to do so in a way that would help them succeed and be retained at the university (for more about the issues and problems involved, see Schwalm).

Working with John Ramage, then Director of ASU's Writing Across the Curriculum program, Schwalm and Ramage together determined that what ASU's basic writing students needed more than anything else was *more time*: more time to think, more time to write, more time to revise. And they wanted to ask ASU's basic writers to do what Andrea Lunsford long ago suggested, to "... continually be engaged in writing in a full rhetorical context, solving problems and practicing conceptual skills in a carefully sequenced set of assignments" (288).

Schwalm and Ramage designed two pilot programs, both intended to give students more time, and both requiring students to use the same textbooks and to work with the same assignments as did the students in "traditional" ENG 101 classes. The following academic year (1993/1994) ASU piloted two versions of classes for students identified as basic writers. One was called *Jumbo*—a six-semester-hour basic writing class. The results for *Jumbo* were mixed, and student response to the approach and their subsequent writing performance did not seem to be at the same level produced by the other approach. That other approach was labeled *Stretch*, a two-semester sequence designed to "stretch" ENG 101 over two semesters. Unfortunately, both the *Jumbo* and the *Stretch* pilots were pretty small, but the consensus was that *Stretch* helped students more, and, unlike *Jumbo*, clearly the *Stretch* model was faithful to Ramage and Schwalm's original notion that ASU's basic writers needed more time. So, beginning in the fall of 1994, ASU's *Stretch Program* was initially launched, with 512 students enrolled.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these pilot programs attempted to do what David Bartholomae had suggested: to change the curriculum by first "chang[ing] the way the profession talked about the students who didn't fit" ("The Tidy House" 21). Schwalm and Ramage in effect were arguing that the students accepted into ASU but placed into a basic writing class did not give "evidence of arrested cognitive development, arrested language development, or unruly or unpredictable language use" (Bartholomae, "Error" 254). Rather, they saw ASU's basic writing students as capable, and able to *do* the university-level writing the Department of English required. But they also believed that this subset of students could use more time and more directed writing experience, so they would not only write more but also receive more feedback and revision suggestions on their writing. Also, they wanted ASU to move away

from an outsourcing approach and toward a mode of *embracing* those basic writers, to move from a view that these students are defective to one that, as Mina Shaughnessy taught us, understands that “students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes” (5).

## **Program Design<sup>3</sup>**

Since ASU’s computer system would not allow Schwalm and Ramage to name the two-class *Stretch* sequence something like ENG 101A and ENG 101B, they decided to have the first class carry the Writing Across the Curriculum label as WAC 101. So, even if the course was viewed as “remedial” (as so many basic writing programs are), this connection to the Writing Across the Curriculum program provided some political protection.<sup>4</sup> Because the WAC 101 classes were to be directly connected to specifically-designated sections of ENG 101, the *Stretch* sequence was created to be *part* of first-year composition, rather than something *outside* and thus vulnerable to political attack.

Schwalm and Ramage wanted to give ASU’s beginning writers more time to work on and revise and think about their writing, so instead of doing all the ENG 101 assignments in one semester, they wrote three papers each semester, each with multiple drafts, along with a portfolio analysis of their writing, which served as a final examination.<sup>5</sup> Just as it is important that *Stretch* students use the same textbooks that “traditional” ENG 101 students use, the direct connection between ENG 101 and *Stretch* assignments is critical.

To put this notion—that *Stretch* is a version of first-year composition—into a wider context, see Table 1 for the “tracks” students can take to fulfill their first-year writing requirement at ASU.

**Table 1: Placement into ASU’s Writing “Tracks”**

<i>Stretch</i> sequence	WAC 101 → ENG 101 → ENG 102
Traditional sequence	ENG 101 → ENG 102
Accelerated sequence	ENG 105
ESL <i>Stretch</i> sequence	WAC 107 → ENG 107 → ENG 108
ESL traditional sequence	ENG 107 → ENG 108

These several tracks are all seen (and represented to the administration and the public) as part and parcel of the same thing: the first-year writing requirement. What this new approach does is give our basic writing program protection from those who see such programs as remedial—if you want to attack *Stretch*, then you also have to attack the traditional version of ENG 101, as well as the accelerated version of first-year writing (ENG 105).

Contrast this model, where the basic writing program is part of the first-year writing program, uses the same books, asks students to construct the same assignments, etc., with one in which the basic writing program is seen as pre-English 101. That view makes it easier for BW programs to be attacked as “not belonging at the university” and as “high school courses.” Not so with *Stretch*.

Since *Stretch* classes are college-level classes, *Stretch Program* students earn three hours of elective credit for the first part of the *Stretch* course sequence (WAC 101), credit that counts toward graduation at ASU, and then three hours of ENG 101 credit for their second semester’s work (ENG 101). The list that follows gives a few more administrative details that will be useful to anyone contemplating a *Stretch* model for their own college or university:

- WAC 101/107 began as a pass/fail course, where the grades *Stretch* students earned for their papers and other work *accumulated* and counted as 50 percent of their ENG 101 grade. The original notion was that the pass/fail designation would take some of the pressure off of students during their first semester in college. However, students generally did not like the pass/fail aspect of WAC 101/107, as the class then did not help their GPA. So, in 2007, WAC 101/107 was changed to a graded class (largely because of those student concerns).
- ASU tries to keep the same teacher with the same group of students for both semesters. This doesn’t always work out, of course, but it does most of the time, and *Stretch* students tell us that they very much like having the same classmates and the same teacher for two semesters. One thing we’ve noticed is that students who are together for two semesters generally build a useful “writing community.” It takes some time for students to learn to trust each other in terms of peer feedback, and *Stretch* teachers almost always see, in that second semester, much improved peer review.
- Students place into all of ASU’s writing classes based on their ACT or SAT scores.<sup>6</sup>

- ASU also offers sections of *Stretch Program* classes for international students, as these students especially benefit from more time to work on their writing.
- *Stretch* classes were initially capped at 22 students, as compared to 26 in traditional ENG 101 classrooms, so *Stretch* students would receive more personal attention. Beginning in the fall of 2004, all 100-level English classes were capped at 19.<sup>7</sup>

## Long-Term Results

Not all of our data paints *Stretch* in a perfect light; frankly, there are areas we need to improve on. At the same time, however, most of the data indicates that the *Stretch* concept actually works and that thousands of students have benefited from the extra time and guided writing experience they receive with the WAC 101—ENG 101 *Stretch* sequence.

To track accurately what happens with *Stretch* students, we use a step-model:<sup>8</sup>

- A number of students register for WAC 101
- A percentage of these students pass WAC 101
- A percentage of these students register for ENG 101
- A percentage of these students pass ENG 101
- A percentage of these students register for ENG 102
- A percentage of these students pass ENG 102

There are a number of ways to consider this data, and for our purposes here we will provide information on:

### Student Profile

- *Stretch* student ACT/SAT scores compared to traditional ENG 101 students.
- Enrollment by students from historically under-represented groups (at ASU, we consider these to be students who self-identify as African American, Asian American, Hispanic, or Native American students).<sup>9</sup>

### Pass Rates

- For WAC 101 compared to pass rates for the previous community-college class (ENG 071).

### *Stretch* at 10

- For *Stretch* ENG 101 students compared to pass rates for students taking traditional ENG 101.
- For *Stretch* students once they're done with *Stretch* and take ENG 102, compared to traditional ENG 102 students.
- For students from historically under-represented groups.

Continuation Rates

- Fall-spring retention (for *Stretch* students, that is from WAC 101 to ENG 101; for traditional students, it's from ENG 101 to ENG 102).

The step model, then, will examine:

A number of students register for WAC 101 [student profile]

A percentage of these students pass WAC 101 [pass rates]

A percentage of these students register for ENG 101  
[continuation rate]

A percentage of these students pass ENG 101 [pass rates]

A percentage of these students register for ENG 102  
[continuation rate]

A percentage of these students pass ENG 102 [pass rate]

We have—after a full ten years of *Stretch*'s existence and because ASU is such a large institution—some pretty large data sets. To provide a sense of the numbers we will detail below, here are a few statistics from those data sets:

- Number of WAC 101 students, fall semesters 1994 through 2004: 7,826
- Number of ENG 101 students, academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05: 45,668
- Number of WAC 101 students from under-represented groups, fall 1994 through fall 2004: 2,856
- Number of ENG 101 students from under-represented groups, academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05: 9,873
- Number of ENG 102 students, academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05: 53,516
- Number of ENG 102 students from under-represented groups, academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05: 10,531

## Who Our Students Are

Arizona State University is a large, urban university with roughly 50,000 students on the Tempe campus. There are now versions of *Stretch* at the other three ASU campuses, but their data is so new that it is not included here.

As noted above, we place all of our students—roughly 9,000 in our first-year classes—into either *Stretch*, traditional ENG 101, or ENG 105 based on their standardized test scores. While from time to time we have conversations on whether we might somehow move to a form of directed self-placement (see Royer and Gillis, “Directed” and “Basic Writing”), we haven’t yet figured out how to do this with so many new students each fall semester. To make matters worse, ASU (as of this writing) does not have mandatory orientation, so we wouldn’t be able to provide placement information and advice to all incoming students. So for now we’re continuing to place students based on their SAT verbal or ACT English scores (this appeals to the university administration since the students pay for this testing). At the same time, there do seem to be significant differences in the average scores of *Stretch* students, as compared to those placed into ENG 101. The following data is from fall semesters, as that’s when most of our students start their classes here. For the 11 fall semesters (since *Stretch* was put into place: fall 1994—fall 2004):<sup>10</sup>

- 5,362 **WAC 101** students had an SAT verbal score, averaging **425**.
- 28,113 **ENG 101** students had an SAT verbal score, averaging **544**.

On average, then, the SAT verbal score for *Stretch* students is about 120 points *lower* than their counterparts who place in traditional ENG 101 classes. (There is roughly the same difference—120 points—between students placed into ENG 101 and those placed into ENG 105, our one-semester class that fulfills the composition requirement.) The same is true for ACT scores:

- 4,408 **WAC 101** students had an ACT English score, averaging **16**.
- 20,185 **ENG 101** students had an ACT English score, averaging **23**.

In addition, more *Stretch* students—by a large margin—are identified as belonging to an historically under-represented group (at ASU, we consider

these to be students who self-identify as African American, Asian American, Hispanic, or Native American). Students from these populations—since the majority of them, historically, have not attended college—are sometimes seen as at-risk in terms of university success (and since twice as many place into our basic writing sequence of classes, they also are seen as at-risk based on their test scores):

- Over the 10 fall semesters (1994–2004), **36.49 %** of the students registered in **WAC 101** were from these under-represented groups.
- Over the past 10 academic years (1995-96–2004-2005), **21.62 %** of the students registered in traditional **ENG 101** were from these under-represented groups.

ASU has made great progress at including more students from under-represented groups: in the fall of 1995, **18.7%** of our new students came from under-represented groups. By the fall of 2006, however, some **25.6%** came from those groups. At the same time, *Stretch*'s population was also changing: in the fall of 2006, **43.2%** of WAC 101 students came from those under-represented groups.

In effect, then, while traditional ENG 101 classes have about one student in five or so from one of these under-represented groups, *Stretch* classes have almost twice that number—almost two in five. This data reflects, of course, any cultural bias in standardized testing, in addition to how effectively (or ineffectively) a student's grammar-, middle-, and high-school education has prepared that student for the ACT or SAT. In Arizona such preparation is often worse than in other states, as our continually conservative state legislature constantly refuses—even under court order—to properly fund schools in poorer Arizona communities.

In any case, that's a snapshot of *Stretch* students: they're seen as the most at-risk because they have the worst test scores (by a significant degree), and more of them come from groups that historically have not attended universities.

## **How Our Students Perform**

One way to measure how *Stretch* students perform is to consider how they do in comparison to other groups of students. You may recall that WAC 101 replaced the community college ENG 071 class. For the final five

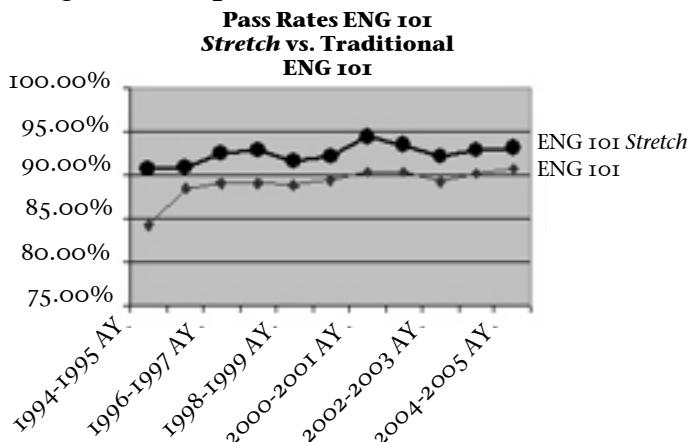
years (before we implemented *Stretch*) we asked our basic writing students to take **ENG 071**, the pass rate was **66.22%**. In comparison, students pass **WAC 101** at a **90.15%** rate. This pass rate—reflecting student success—is significant because when many students fail a class, they simply stop coming to school. So when ASU implemented *Stretch*, our retention rate immediately improved.

While our basic writing students clearly did better in WAC 101 than in the class they had been taking, ENG 071, how did they fare against their ENG 101 counterparts? To properly compare the two sets of students, we need to compare how both groups did when taking ENG 101 (this data covers academic years 1994-1995 through 2004-2005):

- The pass rate for ***Stretch* ENG 101** students averages **92.65 %**.
- The pass rate for traditional **ENG 101** students averages **88.88 %**.

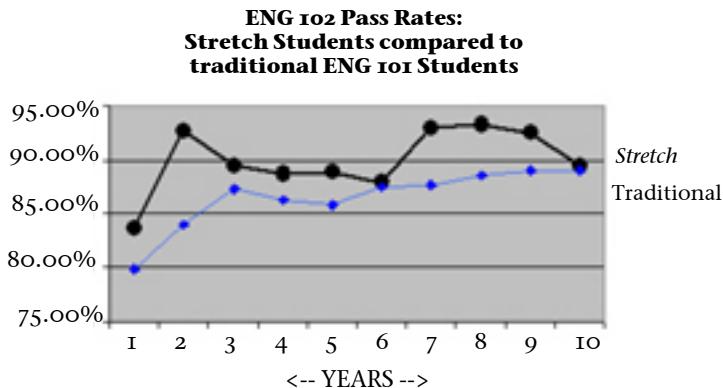
Clearly, the WAC 101 semester, which gives these at-risk students more guided writing experience, helps them. *Stretch Program* students consistently pass ENG 101 at a higher rate than do their counterparts who take traditional ENG 101.<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, these pass rates hold true over time (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Comparative Year-to-Year Pass Rates**



How do *Stretch* students perform when they leave the program and take ENG 102? Again, *Stretch* students consistently pass ENG 102 at a higher rate than do their traditional ENG 101 counterparts (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Comparative Pass Rates for Stretch ENG 101 and Traditional ENG 101**

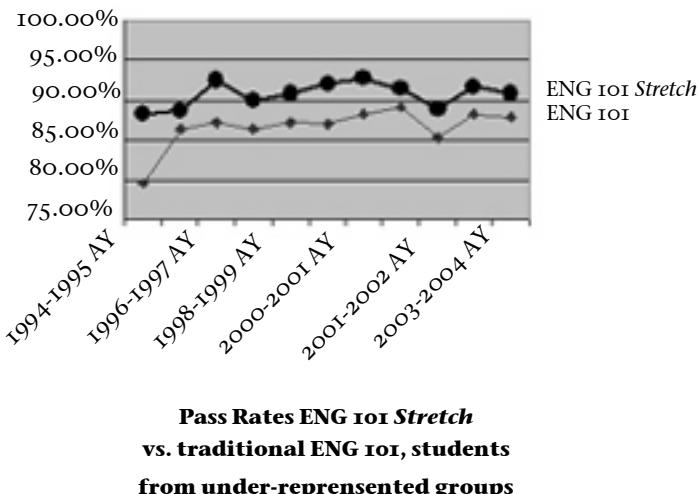


We see similar data sets—a higher pass rate—for students from historically under-represented groups. These students pass ENG 101 at a higher rate when they’re in the *Stretch Program* (as above, this data covers academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05):

- Students from under-represented groups pass **Stretch ENG 101** at an average rate of **90.81 %**.
- Students from under-represented groups pass traditional **ENG 101** at an average rate of **87.34 %**.

As with students in our general student population, the data for students from under-represented groups also holds true over time. They consistently pass ENG 101 at a higher rate than do those students in traditional ENG 101 classes:

**Figure 3: Comparative Year-to-Year Pass Rates for Students from Under-Represented Groups in ENG 101**



**Pass Rates ENG 101 *Stretch*  
vs. traditional ENG 101, students  
from under-represented groups**

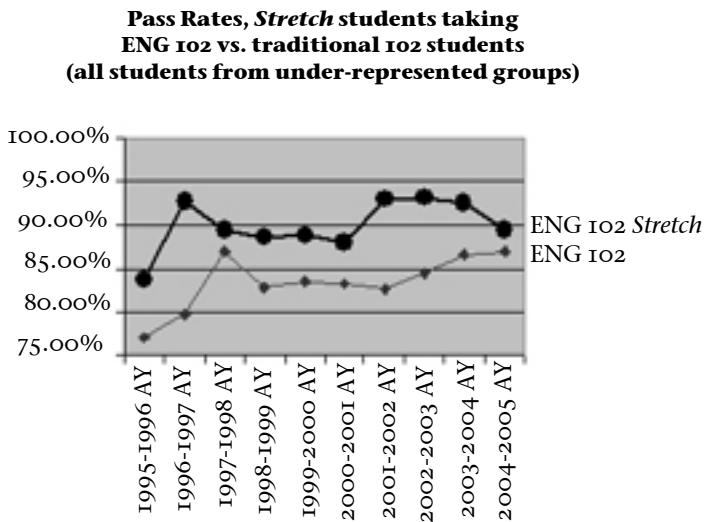
For both our general group of students, then, as well as students from under-represented groups, the extra semester of guided writing experience enhances their success in ENG 101. But it's important to note that we're *not quite* comparing apples-to-apples here. That is, the *Stretch Program* students we're examining have already taken and passed WAC 101, usually with the same teacher and group of students—so even with the lower test scores and even though more come from under-represented groups and are seen as at-risk in the university . . . perhaps they *should* pass ENG 101 at a higher rate, since as part of the *Stretch Program* they have more time to spend on their writing, and are with the teacher for two semesters.

So how do *Stretch* students do when they move to the next semester and take ENG 102? Former *Stretch* students from under-represented groups—the ones with the worst test scores—appear to benefit from the extra semester of guided writing experience: they pass ENG 102 at a higher rate than do traditional ENG 102 students (this data covers academic years 1994-95 through 2004-05):

- **Stretch** students from under represented groups pass ENG 102 at an average rate of **88.65 %**.
- Students from under represented groups taking **traditional** ENG 101 pass ENG 102 at an average rate of **84.17 %**.

As with data for our general student population, these pass rates are as outlined in Figure 4. While recently the comparative pass rates have been getting closer, students who had the benefit of taking WAC 101 clearly benefit—in terms of passing—when they do take ENG 102.

**Figure 4: Comparative Year-to-Year Pass Rates for Students from Under-Represented Groups in ENG 102**



It's important to note that *Stretch* doesn't seem to help one *group* of students as well as it helps others. That is, when we compare how, say, Asian American students succeed in ENG 101 as compared to WAC 101, we don't see much difference. While Asian American students pass ENG 101 at a 90.97 % rate, their passing rate for WAC 101 is only slightly lower, 89.50 %. But for our Native American students, the results are somewhat starker. Native American students pass ENG 101 at a rate of 86.22 %; they pass WAC 101 at a rate of 81.68 %. In effect, about five percent more of our Native American students fail WAC 101 than fail ENG 101.

The other two groups of students from under-represented groups (Hispanic and African American) pass both ENG 101 and WAC 101 within two percentage points of each other. The only big difference is the poor pass rate of Native American students in our WAC 101 classes, and at this point we do not have an answer as to why.

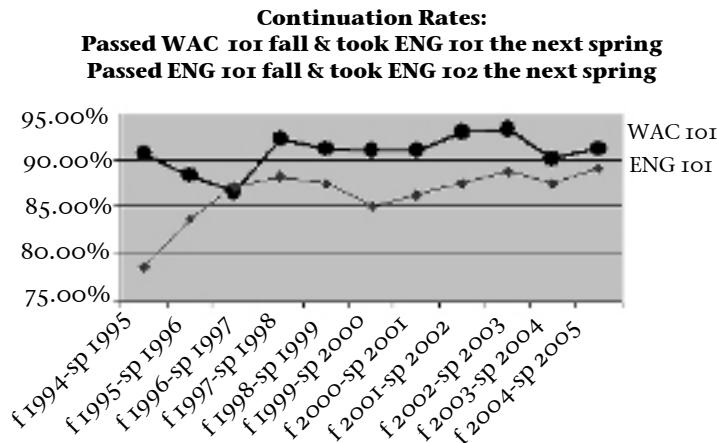
## **How *Stretch* Program Students Persist**

Finally, how do *Stretch* students persist? One way to consider student persistence is to look at, for example, the percentage of students who pass ENG 101 in the fall semester and subsequently register for ENG 102 the following semester. Likewise, we can track *Stretch* students who took WAC 101 in the fall and then registered to take ENG 101 the following semester.<sup>12</sup> The cumulative percentages are:

- **90.90 %** of *Stretch* students who pass WAC 101 in the fall take ENG 101 the next spring.
- **86.52 %** of traditional students who pass ENG 101 in the fall take ENG 102 the next spring.

Figure 5 shows student continuation data from fall 1994/spring 1995 to the fall of 2004/spring 2005, demonstrating that during each fall-spring period, *Stretch* students continued to the next class at a somewhat higher rate than their traditional counterparts.

**Figure 5: Comparative Continuation Rates for *Stretch* and Traditional Students in ENG 101 & ENG 102**



From a more qualitative point of view, *Stretch* students indicate that they feel the sequence improved their writing (about 90% say so). What they like most about the program is having more time to work on their writing, which validates Schwalm and Ramage's initial concept. Students also like being able to work with the same group of students and have the same teacher for both the WAC and ENG portions of the program.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The most recent modification to *Stretch*, as noted earlier, was to change the first class in the *Stretch* sequence from pass/fail to graded.

We continue to monitor the program, especially in light of the fall 2004 modification that dropped the cap on all 100-level English classes to 19 students. One area we're all concerned with is retention, usually measured by the number of first-time full-time freshmen who take classes one fall and then return the subsequent fall. As of this writing, we have two full years of data (2004-2005, and 2005-2006) and can say that "retention" rates for students taking WAC 101, ENG 101, ENG 102, and ENG 105 are all higher than they were when class sizes were larger. I'd hesitate to give all of the credit for student retention to the smaller class size, but it only makes sense that smaller classes help everything else the university is doing to aid retention.

We also have an eye on what our sister institution, the University of Arizona, is doing to help their basic writers. For the past two years the U of A has offered what they call ENG 101+, essentially a writing studio model in which students classified as basic writers are required to attend an additional one-hour session along with their writing class. These sessions are facilitated by the regular U of A writing teachers, and their preliminary results are very promising.

Is *Stretch* the correct model for every institution? Of course not: it works very well at ASU, and has for more than ten years now, and we expect it to continue to serve our basic writing student population. At the same time, we're cognizant of how other colleges and universities help their own basic writers and we'll continue to monitor and modify *Stretch* as time goes on.

## **A Postscript**

In 2003, *Stretch* won ASU's President's Award for Innovation. My thought at the time was that such an award would give *Stretch* some political protection. After all, how could anyone attack a program that was not only

a national model but that also won our own President's award?

Alas, in August of 2007 (as I'm writing this), our new Dean, under enrollment pressure, raised the caps of half of our WAC 101 sections from 19 to 22 (they must have felt they needed about 100 extra WAC 101 seats, as they raised the caps on 34 WAC 101 sections by three students in each section).

The Dean did so over my objections as well as the strong objections of the Chair of the Department of English. The Dean's decision to raise the caps was made on the Friday before classes started, at 4:45 in the afternoon.

Since then, we've met with the Dean and shared with him the kinds of information on success rates, ethnic mix, and so on that we've reported in this article. The Dean was apologetic; he seemed to understand the student population involved; he seemed to realize that, under enrollment pressure, he'd made an unfortunate decision; he spoke of more resources for us "now that I've seen this information." Time will tell, of course, so stay tuned, as what seemed to be a lemon on the Friday before classes began might yet turn into lemonade. At least with our basic writing program, there's never a dull moment!

## Notes

1. For a discussion on the problematic terms "basic writer" and "basic writing," see Adler-Kassner; DeGenaro and White; Rosendale *Rethinking* and "Investigating"; Rosen-Knill and Lynch; Shaughnessy (40).
2. There are, of course, other approaches designed to help students identified as basic writers. See, for example, Crouch and McNenney; Fitzgerald "The Context" and "Basic Writing;" Goen and Gillotte-Tropp; Gleason; Grego and Thompson; Lalicker; Smoke; Soliday and Gleason; Winslow and Mische; Wiley.
3. For more details on the overall *Stretch Program* design, see Glau, "The *Stretch Program*," "Mainstream Plus," and "Bringing Them Home"; also see Lalicker.
4. For more on *why* basic writing programs often need "political protection," see Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Collins and Blum; Gilyard; Goto; Harrington and Adler-Kassner; Mutnick; Rodby and Fox; Soliday; Stevens.
5. When *Stretch* started, ENG 101 students wrote six papers, so it made logical sense for WAC 101 students to write three papers, followed by three more in their ENG 101 semester. Today (2007), traditional ENG 101 students write four papers over the course of a semester, so now *Stretch* students are both *stretched* (more time) and *expanded* (they write six vs. four papers in traditional

ENG 101 classes) in terms of the work they do for their writing classes.

6. Students with an SAT verbal score of 530 or lower, or an ACT Enhanced English score of 18 or lower are placed into the *Stretch Program*. Students with a TOEFL score of 540 or less are placed in the ESL version of the *Stretch Program*. Students with a 620 or higher on the SAT verbal or 26 or higher on the SAT English can take our one-semester class, ENG 105. For a more comprehensive look at placement, see White.
7. As of this writing we have three full years worth of data with these smaller class sizes. Since we dropped the class size to 19, pass rates are higher for WAC 101 and ENG 101 and 102 than they've historically averaged; DWE (drop-withdraw-failure) rates are lower, continuation from fall to spring is better, and student evaluation numbers are *all* better than they have been, historically, for all ranges of teachers (Professors, Lecturers, Instructors, Teaching Assistants, and Faculty Associates).
8. For a long-term look at basic writers using a longitudinal case study approach, see Sternglass.
9. Eleanor Andrew and Margaret McLaughlin provide a useful discussion that focuses on African American BW students; Laura Gray-Rosendale, Loyola K. Bird, and Judith F. Bullock provide a thoughtful discussion of Native American student experience in BW and other classes. For a useful discussion of how we teachers represent race in our own research and writing, see Center.
10. Some students, of course, had both an ACT and SAT score, so there is some overlap in student populations for these score groups.
11. Students exit from the *Stretch Program* based on the teacher's judgment of progress, which is in turn based on the Writing Program's goals and objectives as articulated in our version of the WPA Outcomes Statement.
12. Of course, some students who pass WAC 101 or ENG 101 in the fall simply don't take an ENG class the following spring semester. Our thinking is that the small percentage of such students is probably about the same for both groups we're considering here, so the results, as shown, are probably pretty accurate.

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